

[Selling Violins and Organs in the '80s]

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WPA L. C. PROJECT Writers' UNIT

Form [md]3

Folklore Collection (or Type)

Title Selling violins and organs in the 80's

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Place of origin Portland, Oregon Date 2/27/39

Project worker Sara B. Wrenn

Project editor

Remarks

Form A

Circumstances of Interview

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Sara B. Wrenn Date February 27, 1939

Address 505 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon

Subject Selling violins and organs in the '80s.

Name and address of informant H. S. Richards 3229 Hawthorne Ave., Portland, Oregon

Date and time of interview February 24, 1939; 1:30-3:40 P.M.

Place of interview Above address — business and dwelling place.

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant —

Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you —

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Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Small room — half workshop, half salesroom. Small-paned, dirty, unshaded windows. Floor of bare boards, and not too clean. A rude counter across the room, behind which was a small work table, a rawhide-bottom kitchen chair, an ancient kerosene heating stove. In this part of the room the walls were covered with old calendar lithographs, interspersed with crude paintings of towering peaks and salmon-hued sunsets. The afternoon was bleak and chilly, the kerosene stove unlighted. As the informant, on his side of the counter, stood erect, intoning his disappointingly unpicturesque past, the interviewer, on her side, drooped and shivered increasingly as the time went by. Violins, cellos, flutes and various other string and wind instruments were on the counter and behind it — some of them for sale; others 2 awaiting repair. The building is an old two-storied structure, sadly in need of paint, with living rooms in the rear. The upper story seemed to be unoccupied. Across the street is a business building of modern structure. Business buildings are scattered at intervals along this portion of Hawthorne Avenue, encroaching more and more on what was formerly a high-class residential district.

Form B

Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

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Information obtained should supply the following facts:

1. Ancestry
 2. Place and date of birth
 3. Family
 4. Places lived in, with dates
 5. Education, with dates
 6. Occupations and accomplishments with dates
 7. Special skills and interests
 8. Community and religious activities
 9. Description of informant
 10. Other points gained in interview
1. Of English-Welsh and English-Dutch descent; father, George Richards; mother, Anne M. Groman.
 2. Born at Princeton, Illinois, August 4, 1858.
 3. Widower. Deceased wife, Grace Tryon Richards, One son, aged 29 years.
 4. Came to Oregon in 1874. Lived here ever since.

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5. Public schools. Few lessons in violin under Edgar E. Coursen of Portland, Ore.

6. Mechanic training in father's vehicle shop.

7. Good mechanic in making wagons. Considerable skill in violin making and playing. Always interested in music.

8. Once belonged to Grange at Albany, Oregon. Now member of Townsend Club No. 4. Always has gone to church when possible, but belongs to no denomination or creed.

9. Six feet tall, slender, with dome-shaped head and sparse gray hair, growing long about his neck. Faded blue eyes, somewhat bulbous nose and several front teeth missing.

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10. Gives appearance of one who has not had much joy in life, or perhaps it is his artistic temperament. His shabby, threadbare clothes were worn neatly. In fact, the typical — possibly frustrated — run-down musician, with no color in either his past or present existence.

Form C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

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Address 505 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon

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Name and address of informant H. S. Richards 3229 Hawthorne Ave., Portland, Oregon

Text:

I don' know as I know very much about early stories an' [soch?]. But I kin tell ya somethin' about myself, if yu' want that. My father an' mother come to Oregon in '74 and I came with 'em. Course we come on the train. That 'as past the days o' the cover'd wagon. I never went to school very much; jist about two years I guess. Father was a wagon an' carriage maker. Good too, an' I learn the trade from him. Father was a purty good fiddle player, [on'?] he could sing. I guess that's why I al'ays liked music. Leastways I was a purty little shaver when I begin to rosin the bow an' lay it 'cross the catgut. There w'ant no teacher in Albany, so I got the best book I could, showin' how to hold the violin an' all, and went to work. When I was in my 'teens I came to Portland, in' for five months I think it was, I studied under Edgar E. Coursen. In 1881 an' 1882 I played with him on first violin in what 'as known as the Orchestral Union. It was directed by Professor Kinross.

No, I don't remember anythin' excitin' or out of the way that happened. As for the wagon an' carriage makin' it was jest the same then as now. Only now there aint none — nor nothin' else much, it seems to me.

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You want to know about that sellin' trip I made thru the country east the mountains. It was this way. In 1881 I ingaged to work for J. H. Robbins music house. I an' his son, Frank, went up the Columbia River on the steamboat to The Dalles. At The Dalles we hired a span of horses an' a hack an' started out. We had some organs shipped up to The Dalles an' we took two of 'em an' some violins an' went out sellin' thru the country. Let's see. We sold five at The Dalles. Then we went over to Goldendale (Wash.), in the Klickitat country, an' sold five more. At night I'd play the fiddle an' mebbe Frank'd play the organ, an' we'd

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visit with the farmers as we went along. From Goldendale — le's see, where did we go from Goldendale? Oh yes, we went on to Yakima. We sold five or six there.

What say? No, we didn't have anythin' happen, an' we didn't run across enybody funny or unusual. Sometime the roads was a little muddy, mebbe after a thunder storm — they have purty big thunder storms over there, yu know— an' sometime they was purty dusty. But there wasn't anythin' excitin' — jest a li'l ol' sellin' trip.

Now, le's see, where was I? Oh yes, from Yakima we went to Ellensburg, an' up thru that country we sold six or seven, an' then we come back to Yakima an' down to The Dalles — What say? Didn't we go to any dances or meet any girls or enythin'? Sure, yes, we went to some dances and played for'em, but there isn't anythin' perticular to tell. Yes, I used to call, but I don' know as I c'n remember any them calls now. No, I'm gol derved if I c'n remember one. L's see, wher'd we go from The Dalles this time? Yep, we went to Sherrar's Bridge on the Deschutes River an' into Grass Valley. We sold one there. An' then we went to Prineville, where we sold a few an' up the [Ochcco?], where we sold some more. We was about twenty miles up from Prineville when we heard somethin' about some 3 killin's. A feller named Mossy Barnes had shot Mike Mogan. That was the beginnin' of a lot of shootin' and hangin'. I don' know about that. There wasn't nobody seemin' concerned where we were. We went on to Mitchell an' sold three organs, one to an old man near Mitchell, livin' in a sod house. Did the organ fill the house? I don't remember as to that. We got to Caynon City on the Fourth o' July, an' I an' Frank played for the dance. Ther' was a perade durin' the day, an' I played the drums in the band. No, there wasn't enythin' pertikler about the celebration, jes' a little perade. I don' rekollect anythin' 'cept the band. Wait a minute, ther' wuz a li'l somethin' at Canyon City. We wuz there sever'l days and the young folks invited us on a huckleberry party. There wuz twelve or more in the party an' I an' a young lady wuz talkin' an' there wuz a young feller there with a big bearskin coat, an' he put it on, an' while we wuz talkin' we looked thru the bushes an' ther was somethin' big and hairy movein'. It was that young feller with the bearskin over him, walkin' on all fours, an' the young lady grabbed me and yelled, "Oh, there's an awful bear!" An' then he riz up

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on his hind feet as it were, an' then everybody see who it wus, and one of the fellers sez, "Say, Joe, somebody might o' shot you!"

It wuz while we was at John Day that Frank Robbins got stuck on a girl by name o' Carrie Gentry. Her father was a harness maker, Frank wrote home to his father he wanted to marry Carrie, an' his father wrote back an' told him he couldn't marry her, cause he 'as engaged to a girl in Portland. Well, now, le's see, where wuz I when I begin tellin' you all this? No, there wuzn't anythin' more happened at John Day. Shucks, yes, Frank Robbins broke his engagement in Portland, I guess, 'cause he finally married the girl at John Day. Now, where wuz we? Oh yes, we went over to Baker City, where we sold two organs, an' we sold some organs in the Grande Ronde valley. We sold an organ at Cove, 4 an' then we went to Island City, an' across the mountains to Milton, an' then to Walla Walla, Waitsburg, Dayton, Pomeroy, Almota, Moscow, Farmington, Colfax. No, nuthin' much happened all that time. Once a feller asked me if I'd sell him the band ring I 'as wearin' an' I wanted to know what for, an' he said he was goin' to get married, an' de'd like to give his girl a ring, an' I sed, "All right, you c'n have it," an' he give me five dollars. Le's see — an' then we went to Pullman. How much did we get for the organs? Oh, from \$250 to \$300. But I wuzn't gettin' any commission. I wuz paid a straight salary. How much? I got \$60.00 a month an' all expenses. But shucks: there wuzn't any expenses. Nobody charged us enythin'! When I got back to Portland I hed \$300 cash comin' to me. I wouldn't o' cared much if I hadn't had enythin' for that wuz the best time I ever had in my life. It wuz all jest fun, an' I like scenery an' I saw plenty on that trip.

Yes, as I sed back there, I used to call dances, but there wuzn't ever eny trouble or enythin'. No, no fightin'. Once a feller came in wearin' a six-shooter, an' he got to actin' smarty, an' they tol' him to git out, an' my goodness! he git all right. Sometimes those buggers wasn't half as smart as they thought they wuz.

I al'ays ben a kinda' stingy tightwad, an' now I aint got very much to show fer it. Onc't I had all of \$7,000 in the bank, but today, well, I aint got very much.

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There wuz a time when I wuz on a stock ranch out above Prineville. I dug out fifty acres of sagebrush, where I grew rye an' threshed the seed out by hand with a flail. I had hay too, an' out thrity thirty -two acres with a scythe. Yep, it wuz perty hard work all right. I raised a few horses and I had some milk cows. I used to sand as much as 50 pounds o' butter a week to Prineville, gitting 25 cents a pound fer it. There wuz a feller took it down fer me, an' he never charged a cent.

Form D

Extra Comment

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Sara B. Wrenn Date February 27, 1939

Address 505 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon

Subject Selling organs in the early '80s

Name and address of informant H. S. Richards 3229 Hawthorne Ave., Portland, Oregon

Comment:

Much was expected from this interview. From the time the crude little sign, bearing the legend "Piano Maker and Repairer" was observed, and the man behind the sign, of colorful appearance, and giving promise of a colorful background, emerged from the rear of his shop, the interviewer was on tiptoe with expectancy for the appointment. But folklore of any description proved as hard to elicit, either through queries or suggestions, as the

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proverbial blood from a turnip. Incident or anecdote “just wa'nt in him.” Only an obstinate persistency in reciting the peregrinations and sales of that seven months' trip, point to point, throughout a territory that the interviewer knows from personal knowledge to be rich in folklore. To disappointment was added a poignant feeling of depression. Was it caused by the following dialogue, that took place as the interviewer, hand on door, waited for the bus:

“Say! you're a pioneer aint you?”

“No, but I'm a descendant of pioneers.”

“Hey, now, you're more'n two or three years old.”

“Alas, yes, still I lack several years of being a pioneer. My grandfather —

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“But you've lived in Portland most o' your life, you say. Then I bet you kin remember that slough on the east side the river, where they us'd to skate —”

“Sorry, but there's my bus. Goodbye.”

Now, just in what year did that “slew” cease to exist? Is it possible this fascinating folklore research is “telling on” the interviewer?